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AUTHOR Fredrickson, John H.
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ABSTRACT

Enrollments will continue to decline in the foreseeable future and schools will continue to close. Armed with such long-range planning strategies as a developed master plan, clearly specified goals for school closings, an established process, acceptable and quantifiable criteria for selecting schools to be closed, and the involvement of an informed public, school officials should be able to make the process totally professional, if not totally acceptable. (Author/PGD)

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CIVILIZED STRATEGIES FOR CLOSING SCHOOLS

By

DR. JOHN H. FREDRICKSON
School Facilities Consultant
Middleton, Wisconsin

One of the major reasons that school-closing solutions to school enrollment decline have fared so poorly with the public in the recent past has been the lack of convincing communication by many school officials. Too often there has been little or no real advance information about, or discussion of, the enrollment problems of the local schools. Citizens suddenly find themselves faced with new solutions to old problems without any concrete evidence of commensurate long-range planning by school authorities.

Because the nation's school enrollments are expected to continue to decline into the mid-1980's, down from the 1970 peak of 51,309,000 students to 44,500,000, the problem of managing underutilized school facilities will be confronting us for some time in the future. The question is, can we develop civilized strategies for handling declining enrollments?

Long-Range Planning

Today, perhaps more than ever before, effective long-range planning for all school districts is an imperative. For example, the National School Board Association suggests that long-range plans should be developed to look five to ten years ahead and points to the Highline (Washington) School District's approach as a possible model. This district has lost 13,000 students since 1967 and expects to lose another 3,000 by 1982. In the past thirteen years, it has closed eleven schools and expects to close eight more in the next

four years.

The Highline school-closings have proceeded smoothly and are credited to a multi-year, long-range plan divided into phases each with its own methods, purposes, timetables and special concerns. A task force, consisting of twenty-four citizens and an outside consultant, was commissioned to establish criteria for identifying the school facilities where changes would be considered, identifying and prioritizing alternative uses for excess space, and determining a method for involving the community in the decision-making process.

Master Plan

Aside from whatever the magnitude of enrollment decline may be for a school district, the major objective of long-range educational planning must be the improvement of the curriculum and its delivery system. And this cannot be achieved without a "master plan" which is a comprehensive statement of long-range goals, together with a strategy for their implementation. To develop such a plan, the following steps are advocated:

1. Review and evaluate present programs and practices in light of current statutory regulations, and trends and innovations, at both the state and national levels.
2. Examine and appraise existing school facilities and sites in terms of their structural abilities to accommodate to curricular change.
3. Conduct community-wide surveys to determine the economic growth potential and its resultant impact on local education in the future.
4. Execute annual preschool censuses and district-wide

enrollment projections for comparison and evaluation.

5. Prepare for possible lease or sale of school facilities.
6. Develop an ongoing public dissemination program of the school district's activities, concerns, and objectives.

The Madison (Wisconsin) Metropolitan School District has developed a long-range plan for dealing with declining enrollments which includes a statement of goals, process, criteria, and public information and interaction.

Goals

The purpose of developing a system for ranking Madison's 29 elementary schools was to clarify the process of evaluating and reviewing the total number of buildings required for instruction. The decision-making portion of this process emerged from the following goals:

1. Utilize a variety of criteria reflective of the underlying purpose for closing or continuing school buildings needed/not needed for instruction.
2. Achieve an appropriate balance in the application of the quantifiable and less quantifiable types of criteria.
3. Collect data for school closing/continuing, using agreed-upon criteria; prepare a profile for each school.
4. Examine school closing/continuing data in an effort to provide facilities for instruction in as economical a manner as possible consistent with good instruction.
5. Examine school closing/continuing data in view of the impact on minority student integration.
6. Make determinations on an annual review basis regarding the number of buildings needed to support instruction.
7. Provide a vehicle to permit all interested citizens to share in the rationale behind Board of Education decisions on school facility utilization and disposition.
8. Implement the annual review process in a timely manner, thus allowing the greatest possible lead-time for transition change, and consolidation within total District.

Process

Ranking elementary school buildings is a complex task, and data come from a variety of sources which must be organized to facilitate decision-making. To provide such organization, a three-step process was established:

1. A ranking of all elementary schools in the District using agreed-upon criteria as a basis for the ranking.
2. A computer-simulated closing of those elementary schools that are ranked as having the highest potential for closing.
3. Testing those schools indicating the highest potential for closing against the policies of the Board of Education.

Criteria

As noted, there are twenty-nine elementary schools in the Madison Metropolitan School District. Each school is ranked on a scale of 1-29 on each of the seven criteria below. Schools acquiring the highest cumulative scores on the seven criteria are considered to have the greatest potential for closing:

1. Current year's enrollment.
2. Three-year enrollment projection.
3. Number of students within 1.5 miles of the school.
4. Number of students that adjacent schools within walking distance could accommodate from the school under study.
5. Per square foot operational costs of maintenance and energy consumption.
6. Per student operational costs of maintenance and energy consumption.
7. Per student cost of the total instructional and non-instructional school operation, including special programs offered in the building.

Public Information

Throughout the planning and execution of the previously

mentioned activities, interested citizens were kept both informed and involved. Using citizen committees, District newsletters, extensive coverage by the local media, and open meetings, the general public was afforded opportunities for information and involvement. While recent school closings have not occurred without some rancor, the procedure is now in place and it appears to be effective.

Conclusions

The closing of a neighborhood school because of declining enrollments is never an easy task. Those who have been in the thick of decline agree on one thing: it's a lot harder than handling growth. The idea of decline is foreign to most Americans, who view it with suspicion and link it to failure. A school district which experiences a loss in enrollment can expect some loss in public confidence as well, even if the operation goes smoothly.

These attitudes notwithstanding, enrollments will continue to decline in the foreseeable future and schools, therefore, will continue to close. Armed with the long-range planning strategies just discussed, however, school officials should be able to make the process totally professional, if not totally acceptable. And if the predicted upturn in elementary school populations does occur in the mid or late 1980's, perhaps many of these darkened facilities will once again provide eager children with places to learn and to grow in the years ahead.

OVER

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